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“From Womyn to Grrrls: Fostering understanding between feminist generations”
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Elizabeth Adan’s call for third-wave panel participants could not have been more timely, considering the tense but exciting dialogue begun at last year’s CAA conference, just weeks before her call was announced. At the New York conference, the Women’s Caucus for Art had assembled a panel to pay well-deserved tribute to the New York Feminist Art Institute. The fruit of the dynamic Women’s Liberation movement begun in the late 1960s, NYFAI’s successes in giving women a voice for their self-expression, using art as a vehicle for consciousness-raising and activism, and encouraging women to take all these tools into broader gallery and academic systems reflect the larger successes of feminism’s second wave. However, discussion of the institute’s closing in 1990 led to inevitable questions of feminism’s future in the subsequent question-and-answer session, as one audience member after another each essentially rephrased a single question: “Where are the young feminists?”

As a young feminist in attendance, my first instinct was to slink down in my seat and look around me with the same question on my mind. However, a cursory glance at the rows to my left and right revealed something: I was hardly the only young feminist in attendance. Indeed, with each rephrasing of the question, my neck craned around a few more degrees to gradually take in the entire crowd. Easily 1/3 of the audience appeared to be comprised of women under the age of forty. By the time the woman seated directly to my right stood up to ask the question once again—“Where *are* the young feminists?”—I raised my hand in frustration: “We are right here. *Right next to you.*”

The situation, as I pointed out then, felt familiar as well as symbolic of a much larger problem of the women's movement—ironically, perhaps best summarized here with a football metaphor. A group of feminists who came of age during the second wave stand in a huddle over the movement's game-plan, exhausted and battered at half-time and—looking searchingly at one another—ask themselves, “who do we put on the field?” Meantime, there sits a group of sprightly rookies warming the bench, waving frantically at the all-star huddle, but who—programmed by the unspoken hierarchies that always emerge even in the most team-oriented of activities—have been made to feel too outranked, too insignificant to dare break the concentration of the huddled captains with so much as a shout or a tap on the shoulder. So, there they sit: ready, willing...unnoticed. The applause that my comments drew from the audience made it appear as if the open recognition of this situation bought about a sense of relief to *all* the women in attendance. The focus of questions from that point shifted from the panel to the audience; beginning an unresolved but thrillingly necessary dialogue about this unfortunate reality of contemporary feminism's intergenerational tension...although *tension* would perhaps be an inappropriate word for it. Intergenerational *blindness* might be a better way of stating our present situation, because it really is a matter of not seeing, and of subsequently not understanding.

Tension, however, certainly does come into the picture, particularly when it comes to the day-to-day realities of feminist activism, because few young women are content to warm the bench for long. Indeed, it seems as if the cultural blindness to a third wave of feminism in the United States has resulted not in the mass rejection of feminism that many—including older feminists—assume has happened, but instead in either a storming of the field or, rather, a change of venue altogether as young women create their own work and conduct their own research in a

parallel feminist universe that the women who *would* be coaching them are either unaware is happening or, worse, have little interest in either supporting or acknowledging. (To underscore this problem, it bears noting that at this same conference where young women's alleged rejection of feminist bonds and ideals was so casually discussed as fact, there were nine panels specifically dedicated to women's art and feminist art history, in which easily half, if not the majority of participants were early-career artists and scholars; and the White Columns' third-wave homage to feminist art history, *Regarding Gloria*, had just closed after a much-publicized and successful run.) My intention, however, is not to scold second-wave feminists for hogging the ball—especially not when their example and nurturance led younger feminists such as myself to the women's movement in the first place. Much of the intergenerational blindness that one finds is the product of much more complex issues—which I would like to address by (happily) leaving these half-baked sports metaphors...

...by turning to cheerleading. (LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE) Feminist cheerleading! In the spring of 2003, several of my students at the Kansas City Art Institute banded together to found the Rah! Booty cheerleading squad. Comprised of young women with fluency in the street-smart activist language of “culture jamming” promoted through popular activist groups such as AdBusters and @™Mark (pron: Artmark),¹ Rah!Booty appropriate and subvert the stereotype of the “cheerleading squad” as a catch-all collective to collaborate on performance-based work. Their projects to date have ranged from crashing city parades to perform cheers that range from protests of the current war in Iraq to facts about urinary tract infections; to a group exhibition in which members explored the possibility of individuality in a feminist collective by creating and exhibiting photo-narratives around each woman's fantasy life; to a lecture and workshop for middle-school children in which they survey the history of activist performance art.²

The existence of Rah!Booty to me exemplifies both the resiliency of second-wave feminist ideas and the progressive new politics of the third wave. Most here will make connections between Rah!Booty and similar projects by the groundbreaking Feminist Art Programs at Fresno State and CalArts—in this case, a cross between the hilarious but fierce Fresno “California Girl” pin-ups (RIGHT SLIDE) and “Cunt Cheerleader” squad (RIGHT SLIDE).³ Like both of these projects, Rah!Booty uses popular feminine stereotypes to overturn them. However, Rah!Booty adds a third-wave twist to its work in that, while recognizing the inadequacy of such roles to effectively represent women’s complex experiences and vast potential, they also recognize the *appeal* of these same roles. All of the Rah!Booty cheerleaders *enjoy* playing cheerleaders—mostly because, as surly and belligerent or introspective and shy high-schoolers, they were not expected or even allowed to participate in the sport, and performing as such gives them the feeling of broadening pre-existing roles as well as suggesting new ones for young women. As such, Rah!Booty approaches these roles with a simultaneous dose of criticism and affection that seems to have emerged as a defining trait of the third wave—its typically postmodern refusal to accept either/or, and reservation of the right to claim both/and—which is often misunderstood and even criticized by feminists who earlier sought to demolish rather than reclaim such traditional feminine roles, as well as created work where the political statements were generally clear and direct.

In her contribution to the nine views on contemporary art and feminism recently published in the October 2003 issue of *Artforum*, art historian Peggy Phelan celebrated this tendency of young feminist artists as well as situated it in the larger continuum of cultural history. Phelan points out the degree to which this ambivalence—as she puts it, “in the fullest sense of that term”—is the result of the increasingly self-critical, multicultural, and relativist

postmodern world in which the third-wave of feminism emerged. And Phelan reminds us that this world was shaped not only by second-wave challenges to patriarchal, heterosexist accounts of history, but the anxiety of the women's movement over documenting its own history as artists and art historians simultaneously came to acknowledge the limits of doing just that.⁴ In her own contribution to this same *Artforum* discussion, Linda Nochlin recounted: "Although all of us were for justice, equity, and a fair shake for women artists, critics, and academics, our views were extremely varied, and we were often at odds with one another."⁵ And, although Nochlin laments that many feminist historians have since attempted to pin down a unified trajectory for the second-wave as if this diverse generation were so many butterflies in a case, both she and Phelan seem convinced and pleased that the willful ambivalence that has emerged in young women's art has carried on as well as critiqued the dialogue of their predecessors. Indeed, as Phelan asserts, not only did the women's movement make ambivalence a necessary worldview, "In these days of hideous fundamentalism, the capacity to acknowledge ambivalence is revolutionary."⁶

Rah!Booty's simultaneous rejection and embrace of the American cheerleader is an excellent example of the passionate ambivalence among the youngest feminist artists at the moment. And, to feminists who are used to identifying colleagues by their strident and unyielding politics, such statements likely seem maddeningly open and perversely personal. But, to paraphrase Rosalind Krauss' feminist defense of the famously ambivalent Cindy Sherman, should one take the time to "look under the hood" of young women's artwork today, one finds a great deal more substance than the flashy body work might suggest. And, "flashy body work" may be a good place to start a discussion of both third-wave art and its relationship to feminist history. (LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE) My own research focuses upon the issue of sexuality in third-

wave art, and as such the case studies that I have chosen are culled from this particular avenue of self-expression. But because such work is among that which most polarizes feminists of the second- and third waves, I feel that it is instructive in revealing the intergenerational tensions between feminists in the American art world today. But it seems to me that this small cross-section begins to not only explain but may perhaps start to repair some of the missed connections between third- and second-wave women: a point at which—through close readings of third-wave work—we might begin a kind of intergenerational legend for deciphering each others’ culture.

The work of provocative painter Lisa Yuskavage is among the most controversial of third-wave artists—not just because of her fascination with precisely the sexualized popular imagery that many second-wave feminists railed against in the 1970s and early ‘80s, but because this fascination is one shared by many young artists to whom Yuskavage is a tremendous influence. Her paintings juxtapose portrait studies of the artist and friends with poses and body types drawn from popular fashion photography and vintage soft-core magazines, and painted in a manner meant to imitate the sensuous light and fluffy boudoir scenarios of the Rococo. On the one hand, I believe that Yuskavage’s work—like that of many third-wave artists—is an open challenge to second-wave thinkers whose justified recognition of the misogyny in popular sexual imagery of women also gave way to an unfortunate chilling effect on feminist sexual expression. On the other hand, I also believe that Yuskavage’s challenge is only among the most recent in a battle that feminist artists have been fighting since at least the mid-70s. If one can see beyond overly-simplistic assumptions of inherent sexism in the genres upon which she draws, one might begin to appreciate her appeal to third-wave feminists as well as her works’ links to the second-wave. Looking closely, one notes that the bubbly or dreamy personalities of Yuskavage’s pop sources are replaced by a thick sense of anxiety reflected in the exaggerated “beauty” of her

figures—whose every hip curve and bobbed nose is subtly inflated and angled—as well as in the sense of melancholy their poses and expressions reflect. In works like *Night and Day*, although each woman at first appears to be admiring herself, they in fact scrutinize their bodies with a combined sense of awe and disapproval. The dramatic lighting and thick atmosphere that she expertly renders creates a tension that feels bloated rather than explosive. Yuskavage’s work launches a critique of the ways that the imagery she manipulates encourages women to internalize shame in their own body when it fails to measure up to its distorted reflection in popular culture—a critique indebted to the second wave. However, she adds to this critique of sexist pop culture a revealing look at its role in women’s culture as well, where she well knows many compound but others *confront* that shame by choosing to scrutinize, appropriate, and recontextualize these images from movies, television, and magazines.

Yuskavage has herself spoken of this tortured ambivalence that she (and, I would argue, most women) inevitably feel in our sexualized surroundings—part playground, part marketplace: “I think, ‘good for her!,’ ‘I hate her guts,’ ‘I wish I was her,’ and ‘how come I’m not more like that?’”⁷ Rather than taking sides, Yuskavage presents but does not judge these contradictions. I would argue, like Peggy Phelan, that this ambivalence is a luxury afforded the third wave by their second-wave predecessors: a confident and complicated recognition of the ways in which women relate to and express their sexual selves—as well as their classed, raced, and even gendered selves—not only because the political and personal freedoms that the second wave ushered into the women’s movement, but because of the plurality of this same legacy. Work like Yuskavage’s may exist, as critic Laura Cottingham has argued, to serve the third-wave purpose of asking the questions “that were never asked, or were perhaps asked and then answered too quickly during the seventies.”⁸ (LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE) Yet such work simultaneously speaks to

a tradition of those who first began this line of questioning, not to mention underscoring the breadth of feminist history that this dialogue reveals—as Nochlin’s statements on the early women’s movement should remind us, this is a generation that produced *both* Andrea Dworkin and Annie Sprinkle, *both* Laura Mulvey and Joanna Frueh.

Though Yuskavage is perhaps among the most talked-about of this generation of artists, her third-wave ambivalence is extreme, and there are far more direct feminist statements coming from young women’s studios. The work you will shortly see from my panel colleagues will demonstrate the specificities and commonalities, as well as the global scope of third-wave feminist art practices. However, as a critic and historian I haven’t had to look too far beyond my own Midwestern backyard for such examples. (LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE) St. Paul sculptor Erica Spitzer-Rasmussen’s 2003 *Second Skins* exhibition recently leveled an extremely straightforward feminist critique of the same beauty standards that agonize Yuskavage in works like *Dirty Little Secret*—which explicitly addresses the pain they have caused women through history. At a distance, the piece could be a window display for an upscale couturier, until the viewer notices the pattern of irregularly-shaped bumps protruding from the central sheath’s “skin,” which is surrounded by tiny, clipped, faun-colored hairs. The work is a memorial to women in the early twentieth century who died of radiation-induced cancer from depilatory X-ray therapy. In the tradition of well-known works by second-wave artists of the Womanhouse collective, as well as Eleanor Antin and Martha Wilson, *Dirty Little Secret* protests the extremes to which narrow and compulsory standards of feminine beauty have historically drawn women. (LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE) However, in a series of corsets included in the same exhibition, Spitzer-Rasmussen also addressed how far women have come to be able to reassess and rebel against such norms today. Each corset is comprised of a thick, molded-fiber foundation garment straight out of a 1950s

lingerie catalogue, but the artist has worked into them highly unorthodox decorative elements—cherry tomatoes, dried fish and locks of human and animal hair—inspired by warnings Rasmussen remembered from her childhood about avoiding certain foods that “put hair on your chest.” The artist invites us to take playful pleasure in flouting the feminine convention that a beautiful woman is a perfectly depilated one even as she suggests that these antiquated objects of what earlier generations of feminists considered feminine “bondage” might instead be reinterpreted by a new generation as armor.

(LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE) Even closer to me, in my home base of Kansas City, photographer Nicole Cawlfeld and painter Peregrine Honig are creating work that shares a similar affection for objects and imagery that many in the second wave had perhaps hoped their daughters would grow to revile. However, they do not gravitate toward such subjects uncritically. Cawlfeld’s series of ironically-titled *Thin-Up Girls* is comprised of a series of voluptuous women of various ages, dressed and posed in the style of vintage pin-ups from the 1940s and ‘50s. But, whereas the source material to which Cawlfeld is drawn mocks women’s vanity and struggles toward weight loss even as it demands both of them, her “thin-ups” are engaged in activities that instead demonstrate the degree to which her subjects refuse to connect their beauty to a number on a scale. (LEFT SLIDE) Even more pointed in her feminist critique is Peregrine Honig’s own pin-up series, which uses the genre not to address women’s beauty, but rather the ugly realities that lurk beneath women’s desirable facades. In *Bruiser*, for example, Honig directly appropriates imagery from the same type sources as Cawlfeld—but where Cawlfeld’s photographs attempt to create a celebratory statement with such appropriations, Honig’s paintings manipulate the originals in ways far more sinister and somber. Here, the “blushing bride” of the work’s gag-line (LEFT SLIDE) cowers with a bloodied and bruised eye,

suggesting the violence as opposed to the pleasure of the sexualized scenario into which we peek.

When one pays such close attention to the substance of young women's work, with an open mind to both its feminist potential and lineage, I believe that the existence of third wave feminists becomes increasingly difficult to be overlooked. Indeed, were more feminists to take the bold position of *assuming* feminism when they approach the work of young women, I believe that we would not only force ourselves to "see" more feminists but actually create more as well. I make great efforts to not only gently challenge what I perceive as sexist, but enthusiastically point out what I perceive as feminist in both my male and female students' work. I also go to great lengths to keep up with the popular culture of both my predecessors and my students in hopes of identifying and addressing these same issues beyond the gallery—which is a lot of work, but makes it extremely difficult to generalize the attitudes of those generations that bracket my own. (I certainly have Fanny and Laura Nyro LPs in my collection—[LEFT/RIGHT SLIDE] but wonder how many others who do also own CDs by Sleater-Kinney or Le Tigre...not to mention what the broader feminist conversation would look like if we all did.) Were such efforts to happen more frequently, I believe that we might begin to not only recognize each other, but also reevaluate the utility of identifying each other in terms of feminist "waves" at all. Though it may be helpful for us to identify ourselves according to the shared experiences of the generation in which we were born, I believe that it is equally instructive for us to understand that we live through certain waves *together*, and waves are, literally, fluid. Beside their nebulous beginning and end, they also flow into one another. No matter one's birthdate, as I speak we are *all* living through and defining the third wave—an evolving *present*, not just a generational *label*—and, as

such, are all invested in contributing to and vigilantly looking out for what is made of it as the tide continues to roll.

¹ See <http://www.adbusters.org/home/> and <http://www.rtmark.com/> for examples of these group's tactics.

² See Brian McTavish, "We're Here and We Cheer! Rah Booty adds a shot of whiskey and a punk-feminist twist to traditional cheerleading," *The Kansas City Star* (28 May 2003): F1; and "Rah! Booty adds some boys and broadens perspective," *The Kansas City Star* (26 October 2003): F2.

³ See Faith Wilding, "the Feminist Art Programs at Fresno and CalArts, 1970-75," in Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, *The Power of Feminist Art* (New York: Abrams, 1994): 32-47; Wilding, *By Our Own Hands: The Women Artists' Movement in Southern California, 1970-76* (Santa Monica, CA: Double X Press, 1977); and Judy Chicago, *Beyond the Flower: My Life as a Woman Artist*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin Press, 1993).

⁴ Peggy Phelan, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," *Artforum* 42, no.2 (October 2003):148-149.

⁵ Linda Nochlin, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," *Artforum* 42, no.2 (October 2003):141.

⁶ Phelan, "Feminism and Art: Nine Views," p. 149.

⁷ Lisa Yuskavage, "Interview: Lisa Yuskavage talks with Chuck Close," in *Lisa Yuskavage* (catalogue), (Santa Monica, CA: Smart Art Press, 1996): 27.

⁸ Laura Cottingham, "What's so bad about 'em?" from *Seeing Through the Seventies: Essays on Feminism and Art* (Amsterdam: G & B Arts, 2000): 76.